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SUBJECT: ANWAR IBRAHIM TAKES CENTER STAGE AT PAS DEDICATION CEREMONY

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was the center of attention at the grand opening and dedication ceremony for the new party headquarters building for the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). Despite the attendance of all the party's senior leadership, both the media and PAS leaders gave great deference to Anwar, and his presence overshadowed everyone but the party's spiritual advisor Nik Aziz. Party leaders spoke of a united opposition and revived the Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif) slogan of years past. They focused on democracy in Malaysia and the vital role PAS would continue to play in Malaysian politics. Bound by similar political objectives and an affection for Islamic conservative ideas, PAS and Anwar will remain close allies as they seek to gain influence in Malaysian national politics, but a marriage between the two is not on the horizon. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) held a grand opening ceremony for its new party headquarters building on May 21. Located in one of Kuala Lumpur's notorious red-light districts known as Chow Kit, PAS recently renovated a six-story office building formerly occupied by Malaysia's RHB Bank. The purchase and renovation cost an estimated MYR 8 to 9 million (approx USD 2.5 million) and now consolidates PAS's offices into one building. PAS had previously occupied a complex of smaller buildings in the Batu Caves area of Gombak, Selangor, just outside of Kuala Lumpur. Now located a few blocks from the national headquarters of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), party officials bragged that UMNO could now look out their office windows and see PAS breathing down their backs.

¶3. (U) The location of the new office building in the Chow Kit district brought some expected criticism, but PAS central committee member and party treasurer, Dr. Mohd Hatta Md. Ramli countered that the central Kuala Lumpur location was appropriate and, if nothing else, could provide PAS with opportunities for community outreach to the people of the city that most need religion.

¶4. (U) Party leadership, representatives from all the major opposition parties, and diplomats from the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Japan joined rank and file PAS members in attending the building dedication and grand opening ceremony. Although both PAS President Abdul Hadi Awang and PAS Spiritual Advisor and Kelantan Chief Minister Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat were present for the event, former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was clearly the guest of honor and garnered the undivided attention of all the press and media present. Anwar was honored with a center, front

row seat next to Nik Aziz, taking precedence over PAS Deputy President Nasharudin Mat Isa, all the attending party vice presidents and the party's secretary general, Kamarudin Jaffar. As a religion based organization, it was not extraordinary that party president Hadi Awang played a negligible role, while PAS Spiritual Advisor Nik Aziz was the principal speaker and offered the dedicatory prayer. When the party leadership exited the building to unveil the dedication plaque on the exterior wall, Anwar Ibrahim was again given the place of honor next to Nik Aziz.

15. (U) PAS Treasurer Dr. Mohd Hatta, as the chairman of the new building committee, first addressed the audience and recalled a bit of PAS's history, highlighting the new consolidated offices as another indicator of PAS's growing influence in the country. Hatta recognized the attendance of the opposition party leaders present, which included representatives from the Democratic Action Party (DAP), the People's Justice Party (PKR), and the Malaysian Socialist Party. Hatta spoke of the cooperation among the parties to unseat the National Front (Barisan Nasional - BN) and how the opposition parties truly created an Alternative Front (Barisan Alternatif - BA). He welcomed a new national election and vowed that the Alternative Front would be ready.

16. (C) Comment: DAP abandoned the idea of a unified Alternative Front following the 1999 elections in which DAP lost a number of parliamentary seats and PAS gained enough seats to become the leading opposition party in Parliament. DAP has since refused to be associated with the BA movement it helped found. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that PAS is holding on to the BA slogan and remains interested in the primary opposition parties unifying their efforts against the UMNO dominated National Front. These concerted efforts have been apparent in the last two

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by-elections held in Machap and Ijok, where opposition parties all campaigned for each other's candidates and mobilized their grass roots efforts to seek the defeat of the National Front. DAP will likely continue to avoid the use of the BA slogan, but will coordinate with the other opposition groups to ensure that most election contests are head-to-head races between one opposition candidate and one BN candidate. End Comment.

17. (U) Nik Aziz was the only other person to address the audience during the dedication ceremony, and while his comments were political in nature, they focused primarily on the example set by the Prophet Mohammed. He explained that he was just a man and would naturally make mistakes, as all the leaders of the world were subject to mistakes. He stressed the need to follow the teachings of the Prophets, specifically mentioning Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. Following their teachings, he said, would lead to fewer mistakes in government. Nik Aziz held to a spiritual discussion with political underpinnings, but he did not criticize others leaders, nor did he attack the current Malaysian government. He did not foray into international politics, nor did he discuss a pan-Islamic agenda. He commented on PAS' continued relevance in a democratic society, and recognized the blessings from God that PAS could now open their new party headquarters.

18. (C) Following the dedication ceremony, Hadi Awang, Nik Aziz and Anwar Ibrahim held a joint press conference on the fourth floor of PAS' new office building. The men made general comments about the future of democracy in Malaysia and speculated that the Government's recent pay raises for civil servants were merely an election year campaign tactic to secure more votes for the National Front. The press conference was short-lived, but reiterated the presence and prominence of Anwar at the PAS party function.

19. (C) Comment: PAS has clearly embraced Anwar Ibrahim as a breath of new hope for the opposition. Anwar's strong

Islamic credentials pre-dating his entry into UMNO, his appeal to opposition-minded Malays, and his history of supporting and promoting relatively conservative Islamic principles have made Anwar and PAS close friends as of late. Anwar's PKR party shares a strong Malay base that is often inter-changeable with PAS efforts outside of PAS' traditional strongholds of Kelantan and Terengganu. While PAS would certainly welcome Anwar into the party, were he to decide to join, Anwar seems to recognize the limitations a religious based party would have on his reformist agenda. Thus despite their similar objectives, it remains highly unlikely Anwar will ever associate himself exclusively with PAS. PAS and Anwar will remain close allies as they seek to gain influence in Malaysian national politics, but a marriage is not on the horizon.

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